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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MANAMA 002061

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SUBJECT: KING'S ADDRESS TO PARLIAMENT MARRED BY AL WIFAQ
BOYCOTT

REF: A. MANAMA 2031

[B](#). MANAMA 2009

[C](#). MANAMA 1728

Classified By: CDA Susan L. Ziadeh for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) In his speech to a joint session of parliament December 15, King Hamad announced his instructions for the government to take several measures to ease the financial burden on Bahrain's lowest-income citizens. He ordered a 50 percent cut on outstanding government loans for public housing and a housing subsidy of BD 100 (\$265) per month for those who have waited more than five years to receive a government-provided home. He instructed pension payments to be increased by 20 percent and granted the two public pension funds ownership of public lands to improve their financial position. Although the King spoke about Bahrain's unity and cohesion, Shia opposition political society Al Wifaq's 17 deputies boycotted the session to protest what they perceived as unfair treatment and lack of consultation on Council of Representatives (COR) leadership positions and government appointments. Al Wifaq also boycotted the COR's December 19 procedural session, during which the 23 MPs who were present voted for former speaker Dhahrani to retain his position and leaders of the two Sunni blocs to the first and second deputy slots. Bahrain is abuzz with speculation about Al Wifaq's intentions, with one well-informed contact saying that the boycott was a signal to the government that Al Wifaq may return to street actions if it is unable to deliver on its legislative agenda in the parliament. End Summary.

King Reduces Burden on Poor, Retired

[1](#)2. (SBU) King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa December 15 delivered his national day address to a joint session of the National Assembly, composed of the appointed upper house Shura Council and elected lower house Council of Representatives, in a session marred by the boycott of Shia opposition political society Al Wifaq's 17 members in the COR. Taking a page from Al Wifaq's playbook, the King in his annual speech focused on improving the living conditions for the neediest citizens, promising to reduce the amount due on government loans for public housing, offering a monthly stipend to those waiting for public housing, and raising pension payments. He said, "Bahrain is determined to ease its people's financial burdens and to share its prosperity. On this occasion, and out of our keenness to alleviate our citizen's financial burdens, particularly those of limited income, we ordered a 50 percent reduction of the remaining total value of loans for homes that have been assigned to them by the government." The

Finance Ministry announced December 16 that this move benefits some 13,500 families at a one-time cost to the government of BD 190 million (\$503 million).

13. (SBU) A common complaint in Bahrain is that those eligible for public housing spend an extended period of time, sometimes more than 15 years, before receiving an apartment or house. The King addressed this issue, saying, "We have ordered the payment of a housing allowance for families with limited income who have been on the (housing) waiting list for over five years, in order to lessen citizens' burdens." The press subsequently reported that low-income families in this situation will receive BD 100 (\$265) per month from the government. The King announced an increase in pension payments (by 20 percent) and took steps to improve the financial health of the two public pension funds. "In the same context, and out of the attention and care that we pay to retired citizens, we ordered that the minimum retirement basic wage payable by both the Pension Fund and the General Organization for Social Insurance (GOSI) be raised. This is in appreciation for their valuable and sincere efforts in serving the nation during the term of their service in both the public and private sectors." He also announced that public lands would be transferred to the Pension Fund and GOSI for real estate investment purposes to improve the funds' financial position.

Praise for Unity While Wifaq Boycotts

14. (SBU) In the face of Al Wifaq's boycott of the session, the King praised Bahrain's unity and cohesion. He said, "Bahrain has embraced the values of diversity and

MANAMA 00002061 002 OF 003

coexistence, values we have held in high esteem since the birth of this dear country. Of the Muslim family, Bahrain houses the most tolerant sects, and of the human family, Bahrain houses diverse religions. This coexistence represents the most noble sentiments. Such Islamic and human diversity have made Bahrain great."

Complaints of Unfair Treatment

15. (C) Al Wifaq sources said the group took the decision to boycott the joint session to protest what it perceived as unfair treatment and lack of consultation on divvying up COR leadership positions and government appointments to the new Cabinet and Shura Council (Refs A and B). Since the elections ended on December 2, there had been reports in the press of the largest blocs jockeying for the three leadership positions and the chairs of the COR's five committees. Until just a few days before the King's December 15 address, the groups seemed to have coalesced around the reelection of independent Sunni elder statesman Khalifa Al Dhahrani as speaker, Al Wifaq leader Shaikh Ali Salman as first deputy, and a representative of either Sunni Salafi Al Asala or Sunni Muslim Brotherhood Al Minbar as second deputy. But just days before the King's address, Al Wifaq announced that it should hold the speaker position because it represents the single largest bloc in the COR.

16. (C) Al Wifaq MP and economist Jassim Hussein admitted to Embossos that Al Wifaq had waited too long before deciding to pursue the speaker position. He told the Ambassador that Shaikh Ali Salman had become angry with what he viewed as government interference in COR negotiations over the leadership positions. Not only was the Al Wifaq bloc the largest in the COR, but Hussein stated that Al Wifaq candidates had received 62 percent of votes cast in the two rounds of parliamentary elections, putting it in a commanding position to either hold the speaker slot itself or give its explicit approval to a candidate from outside the bloc.

No Consultations on Cabinet, Shura

¶7. (C) Hussein also said that the government should have consulted with Al Wifaq on Cabinet and Shura Council appointments. For example, Al Wifaq founding member Nizar Al Baharna was appointed Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, but no one from the government had discussed this possibility with Al Wifaq. Additionally, Al Wifaq strenuously objected to the reappointment of Shaikh Ahmed bin Atiyatallah Al Khalifa as Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs and Faisal Fulad to the Shura Council, both of whom were implicated in the Al Bandar report alleging a wide-ranging conspiracy to sway parliamentary election outcomes (Ref C).

¶8. (C) Hussein stated that Al Wifaq had been working with an unnamed intermediary who had tried to broker a compromise between the group and the government. However, when it appeared that there would not be a solution before the King's address, Al Wifaq MPs briefed senior Shia clerics Shaikh Isa Qassim and Shaikh Hussein Nejadi. He press reported that in his Friday prayer sermon, delivered just a few hours before the National Assembly session on December 15, Shaikh Isa asserted that Al Wifaq is the biggest bloc in parliament, making it eligible to have the position of speaker. He said that a legitimate parliament should have a speaker from the opposition, following the model of the 1973 parliament. With implicit support from Shaikh Isa and no movement on negotiations with the government, Al Wifaq announced a three-day boycott of the COR. Hussein said that he and a few others in the Al Wifaq bloc opposed a boycott but a majority of the 17 deputies supported it.

Wifaq Shut Out of Leadership Positions

¶9. (SBU) Although the three-day boycott had expired, the Al Wifaq bloc also did not attend the December 19 COR procedural session. Then-acting speaker Al Dhahrani decided to proceed with swearing in the 23 deputies who were present and holding elections for the speaker and first and second deputy positions. In Al Wifaq's absence, Al Dhahrani was reelected as speaker, Al Asala's Ghanem Al Buainein was elected first deputy, and Al Minbar's Salah Ali took the second deputy position. Later in the day December 19, Al Wifaq issued a press release saying its boycott was over and it would attend future COR sessions, including the Prime Minister's

MANAMA 00002061 003 OF 003

presentation of the government program to parliament on December 20. In fact, all but three Al Wifaq deputies attended the session. (Separately, Shura Council speaker Ali Saleh (Shia) December 19 held elections for the first and second deputy positions, won by Jamal Fakhro (Sunni) and Alice Samaan (Christian).)

Press Condemns Boycott

¶10. (SBU) Press commentary on Al Wifaq's boycott was almost universally negative. Akhbar Al Khaleej editor-in-chief Anwar Abdul Rahman wrote a front-page editorial December 16 that called Al Wifaq's absence from the King's address "an insult to the nation." "It is time for Al Wifaq to learn that democracy is not about dictating, it is about partnership," he wrote. "What pattern of democracy do you have in mind, one that suits only you, at the expense of all others?" In a December 19 piece titled "What's Next?," Al Watan columnist Sawsan Al Shaer called on Al Wifaq to change its position and participate in the COR. She said "this confrontation is in vain," and pointed out that Al Wifaq does not hold a majority in the COR and thus cannot control the

outcome of votes. She asked, "Is this happening just to disrupt the process?"

Comment

¶11. (C) Bahrain is abuzz with speculation about what Al Wifaq's intentions are. Despite the group's reported belief that it "deserves" the speaker position, an Al Wifaq candidate for the position would have had to get 21 out of 40 votes, an unlikely prospect unless it engaged in real dialogue and negotiation with the COR's Sunni blocs and independent deputies. One well-informed contact said that Al Wifaq wanted to put the government on notice that it could return to street actions - demonstrations, protests, petitions, boycotting a COR session, withdrawing from parliament - if it is unable to deliver on its legislative agenda. A Bahraini blogger wondered if, by not taking any of the three top leadership positions, Al Wifaq was signaling to its constituents that it should not be held responsible or blamed for "the inherent impotence of the parliament." Whatever the motivation, the boycott resulted in turning mainstream opinion against the group and has the potential to empower Shia rejectionists, best exemplified by the hardline Haq Movement, who boycotted the elections and have repeatedly accused Al Wifaq of selling out.

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